Humour, translation, and Aristophanes' *Wasps*

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Is translating humour simply impossible? In some cases the answer is surely 'yes'. Take the following joke as an example:

> *Have you heard about the new corduroy pillows? They're making headlines.*

A joke like this relies on the double meaning of a word, in this case 'headlines', which can be taken to refer to a heading in a newspaper or, with a little mental effort, a line on someone's head caused by the uneven texture of a fabric like corduroy. Not a great joke to start with perhaps, but it becomes no joke at all when we try to translate it into languages such as French, German, or Spanish, where the words for 'headlines' – 'manchettes', 'Schlagzeilen', and 'titulares' – aren't capable of conveying these double meanings. When a non-English speaker looks at us quizzically the best we can do is patiently explain what makes the word play funny – by which time any impact the joke may have had is well and truly lost.

Problems with puns

The sensation of being a bemused foreigner, unable to get the joke, is no doubt one familiar to anyone who has read Aristophanes. However skilful the translator, there are always occasions when we as readers of a play find ourselves scurrying to the notes at the back of the book to find out what we have missed. When Sosias is describing a bizarre dream to his fellow slave, Xanthias, at the beginning of *Wasps*, for instance, the humour in the Penguin translation is so faint that it is easy to miss.

> *Sosias: ... this horrible whale-creature had a pair of scales and it was weighing out bits of fat from a carcass.*
>
> *Xanthias: Dividing up the body politic – I see it all. Ghastly!*

The awkwardness in rendering the humour is probably excusable on the part of the translator (David Barrett). He has been faced with a problem similar to the 'headlines' scenario above where he must wrestle with one of Aristophanes' favourite puns – a play on the similarity between the Greek words *demós*, 'fat', and *dêmos*, 'citizen body' – and rather than lose the humour altogether has attempted a substitute joke, a pun on 'body' ('carcass' – 'body (politic)').

On other occasions the translator of the play is more successful in conveying the humour. When the word or idiom on which the joke relies has an equivalent range of meanings in English, for instance, then there is no barrier to putting the humour across. Take the following exchange from later in *Wasps* where Anticleon is explaining to Procleon the advantages of judging lawsuits at home.

> *Anticleon: ... if you get one of those speakers who just go on and on, you won't have to sit there starving, and then take it out on the defendant.*
>
> *Procleon: Oh, I'd never be able to judge so efficiently if I was chewing all the time.*
>
> *Anticleon: Yes, you would – much more efficiently, in fact. Don't they always say, 'After chewing over the facts, the jury decided that the witnesses were lying'?*

In the case of puns, then, there are two distinct scenarios. If the translator is lucky, the word or phrase punned on in the Greek has an equivalent in English, in which case the humour is easily translatable. In the more common scenario, however, English is unable to offer an equivalent and the translator is forced either to make a substitute joke or even to abandon the humour altogether.

Situational humour

Puns are not the only form of humour to appear in Aristophanes' plays. We also find what is sometimes called 'situational' humour, that is humour that does not rely on a play on words. For example, there is no word-play involved when Procleon, after being equipped with a new pair of warm shoes, complains: 'This is terrible! Now I shan't have a single chilblain to comfort me in my old age!'

If we are inclined to think of Procleon's outburst as humour (and we don't necessarily have to find it funny to recognize it as humorous) we do so on the basis that this is not a logical thing for old men to complain about. In other words, the humour lies not in the specific words used but in the situation (hence, 'situational' humour). And for the translator, the fact that situational humour does not rely on the multiple meanings of a given word is hugely significant. As this example shows, this kind of humour is generally *translatable*.

So, unlike puns, situational humour can generally be translated into English – but why do I say 'generally' and not 'always'? The reason is that the translation of Aristophanes' plays does not merely involve the transfer of words from source language (Greek) to target language (English) – there is also the matter of cultural transfer to deal with. The differences between modern English speakers' experience of the world and those of Aristophanes and his original audience are not just linguistic. Aristophanes writes about – and makes jokes about – numerous people, places, events, everyday objects and habits which are simply unfamiliar to us.

World of the courts

Take the fact that Procleon is said to return from the court 'with enough wax under his fingernails to furnish a beehive', for instance. Without knowledge of the workings of Athenian juries this piece of wit would be incomprehensible to a modern reader. To allow uninformed readers to share the joke, the *Penguin* translator uses a common trick of inserting an 'intruded gloss': that is, he adds information to the English translation that is not present in the Greek (given here underlined):

> *Xanthias: He's so mean that he scratches the long line on his tablet every time <u>they get a conviction – full damages</u>; honestly he comes home with enough wax under his fingernails to furnish a beehive.*

So far we've been looking at some of the difficulties translating Aristophanes poses and at some of the devices a translator uses

in order to overcome them (i.e. substitute jokes and intruded glosses). Let's now change tack, though, and think about the question of translating humour more broadly.

One interesting question to consider is what exactly a translator *should* be doing when he/she translates Aristophanic humour into English. The answer to this may well appear self-evident: that is, the translator should, as far as possible, try to convey both the *sense* of the original text (i.e. a joke about a juryman and wax should remain a joke about a juryman and wax) as well as the *effect* of the original text (i.e. where there is a joke in the original text we should also find a joke in the translation).

So far, so good. But in terms of 'effect' is it enough for a translator simply to provide an English joke in place of a Greek joke? After all, if a translator were put to work on an advertising slogan it would be reasonable to expect the English version not only to look like an advertising slogan but also to be capable of selling something. Isn't it reasonable, then, for a translation of a Greek joke to be capable of making us laugh? Would a translation of *Wasps* be acceptable if it gave the impression that Aristophanes' plays contained only weak jokes?

Fashions of faithfulness

What emerges from this discussion is that there are different approaches to translation and different ways of being 'faithful' to the original text. For someone translating for the *Penguin* series, the important thing may well be to convey what I have called the 'sense' and for readers to be left to imagine for themselves how funny the original audience would have found given lines. If, on the other hand, the play were being staged at a theatre for an audience of non-classicists, then a wholly different translation might well be appropriate. In this case, it might well be a priority to get the audience laughing – even if this means abandoning some of the original sense of Aristophanes' Greek. Similarly, using allusions to modern life and politics might be the most effective way of communicating Aristophanes' topicality and liveliness.

Lastly, I think it is worth considering why it is that translations of Aristophanes tend not to be as riotously funny as they might be. This isn't to be put down to a failure on the part of translators, I think. As we have seen, the primary concern of a translator may not be to make the reader laugh. We also have to take into account that senses of humour change: even comedy shows from twenty years ago can seem terribly unfunny and some of Aristophanes' humour may hardly strike us as cutting edge! And to come back to the idea of cultural transfer, it is also important for us to examine our own assumptions about comedy when considering Aristophanic humour and its translation. Unlike much modern British comedy, for example, Aristophanes' plays are capable of long sequences containing no or little humour. So perhaps we should be careful not to demand too much of a translation in terms of humour.

A further point is that there are comic qualities to his plays that we no doubt miss. One such feature that is deeply ingrained is Aristophanes' sense of playfulness, evident, for example, in his lists with their surprise items, gentle puns, coinages and compound-words. This playfulness in his writing can be hard to capture in translation and, perhaps more importantly, can be particularly difficult for modern readers to appreciate for the reason that it is unfamiliar to us. Cultural differences, then, may lie at the heart of what makes Aristophanes so challenging to study and translate. Regardless of the language in which we study them, meeting Aristophanes' plays on their own terms is perhaps the greatest challenge of all.

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